



Current Tendencies Which Limit Faith and Life

By Alva J. McClain *

The Apostle Paul, valiant contender for the Christian faith, is never a mere speculative theologian defending a system of thought for

his own sake. Neither is he greatly concerned to defend God, "as though he needed anything" from man. So far as God Himself is concerned, the Apostle doubtless felt that he could afford to ignore the petty negations of unbelief, knowing that "the foundation of God standeth sure." But their effect upon human life was another matter, one in which God Himself is infinitely concerned. And Paul, in his defense of the Christian faith, never loses sight of the vital relation between the completeness of Christian revelation and the fulness of the Christian life. With him it was not a question of what men might possibly get along without, and yet live. Men may live on a crust of bread, and those who prefer to do so have of course less trouble defending their possessions. But men do not thus live at their best. All the spiritual riches needed to make human life full and complete, the Apostle had found in Christ. To diminish Christ was to plunder the spiritual possibilities of human life. Hence his stern warnings against all tendencies of thought which might obscure or limit the revelation of Christ to men.

One of these warnings appears in the Colossian Epistle, most clearly expressing the implications of

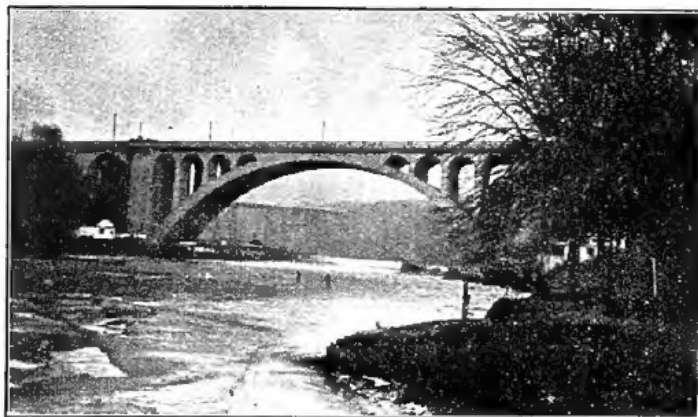
* This article by Professor Alva J. McClain, Dean of Ashland Theological Seminary is reprinted from *The Biblical Review*, a magazine which has been set for the scholarly defense of Christianity. When this article was first printed the editor stated, "This is thoughtful analysis of the trends that are arising from this anarchistic spirit of the times... Freedom from all restraint is for some minds almost religion in itself.... But this article is not confined to the negative side of the case, for Professor McClain devotes his closing pages to showing that Christianity is a constructive power that deals with all of life—life as it really is,... by bringing him (man) into contact with the great Fact that resolves all questions, that is, the transcendent Person, God in Christ."

We are glad to share this article with our readers, feeling that it will not only be an aid in helping to see modern trends, but will cause us to appreciate the stand which is taken by our own Theological Seminary.

yielding to such tendencies: "Take heed lest there shall be anyone that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ: for in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in him ye are made full" (2:8-10). The passage contains three important ideas which need constant emphasis in the irreconcilable conflict between Christianity and the rudiments of the world. Changing somewhat the order of their statement in the passage, these ideas are as follows: First, in Christianity the Person of Jesus Christ has all the fulness and value of God; He is God. Second, in Christ human life is made full and complete. Third, human life may be hindered from reaching its ideal fulness in Christ by reason of certain tendencies, philosophic and traditional, which limit the Christian message and mar its effectiveness. It is the last line of thought which I shall follow in this paper, but the first two should be kept in mind because they constitute the background of the entire discussion.

One of the most apparent tendencies in the modern religious world is what may be termed the **vogue of vagueness** in theological matters. This is a curious characteristic of the modern religious mind, especially curious because science is the ruling spirit of the present hour, and to science vagueness is one of the unpardonable sins. The scientific method, to which the world is so greatly indebted, demands clarity and exactness in term, formula, definition, and statement. Yet strange to say, when the Christian thinker attempts to employ the same method in the statement of his faith he is confronted by an almost intolerant opposition. The physicist who labors for years to give the world an exact formula is applauded, but the Christian investigator under similar circumstances is often condemned as a splitter of theological hairs. It is permitted us to use such terms as "God" and "Christ" and "immortality" and "atonement," but we must be careful not to make any very definite assertions about them.

This seeming passion of vagueness indicates, for one thing, a spirit of intellectual indolence in the field of religion. For vagueness is the beloved refuge



You drive your car over the bridge with perfect faith that it will hold you. But it really is not your faith which holds you, it is the object of your faith. So it is with the Christian. Faith cannot save unless that faith is placed in the right object. The Lord Jesus Christ is the object of our faith. He is able to save to the uttermost.

of sluggish minds. It makes accuracy unnecessary, relieves the sharp travail of thinking, and settles all differences by turning out the lights. As a labor-saving device, it has obvious advantages. An acquaintance of mine used to have difficulty with the spelling of the word friend. So he always wrote the i and the e exactly alike, and carefully placed the dot midway between them. By this rather simple expedient he spared himself the labor of mastering the correct spelling, and at the same time escaped the humiliation of ignorance. A certain type of modern religious thinking is like this. Berkeley used to say,

"We first raise a dust, and then complain that we cannot see." With a slight change, the philosopher's charge might be applied to the type of thinking which I have in mind. They first raise a dust, and then declare that they can see.

It has been argued, of course, that exactness in matters of religion is not possible as it is in the case of the natural sciences. Without bothering to deny such an argument, it will be sufficient to point out that, for purposes of discussion and communication, exact terms are essential. They make the work of different investigators available to each other. They make it possible to teach ideas. It is not in the first instance a question of whether any one religion is either true or false; but, if we are to study the field of religion at all, we must find terms with some degree of definite meaning. Even if all religion were false, as some would have it, still we could not play fast and loose in our discussions of it. There is little use, certainly, in forbidding the use of ancient terms in new senses. No one can stop that. But what we should object to—in the interest of clear thinking, at least—is this shifting of the meanings of traditional religious terms without due explanation. If someone, for example, wishes to identify God with the social mind of humanity, there is no way to prevent him. Only such a one should explain his meaning when he solemnly affirms, "I believe in God the Father."

Definiteness in the religious field is highly desirable, if for no other reason than that it is in the

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TESTIMONY OF HISTORY

By Chrysostum (Born 347 A. D.)

"For when we immerse our heads in the water, the old man is buried as in a tomb below and wholly sunk forever: then as we raise them again, the new man rises in his stead. As it is easy for us to dip and lift our heads again, so it is easy for God to bury the old man and shew forth the new. And this is done thrice, that you may learn that the power of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost fulfilleth all this." Again: "Christ delivered unto His disciples one baptism in three immersions of the body, when He said to them, 'Go teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'"

—Commentary on John Homily 25

Is the care of worldly things
Sovereign in my thought;
Is anxiety, which clings,
Through my being wrought?
Lack of trust in Care Divine
Proves a grievous sin is mine.

Is it pleasure reigns supreme
O'er my daily plan;
Do I confidently dream
That from Earth and Man
I can find my heart's best store?
Then is "sin laid at my door."

Care or Pleasure, Self or Pride,
If it be enthroned
In my soul; o'er all beside
Sovereign it is owned:
Then it takes within the soul
God's own right—supreme control.

—William Olney

CURRENT TENDENCIES WHICH LIMIT FAITH AND LIFE

By A. J. McClain

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interest of intelligent discussion. And definiteness is possible in our discussions of Christianity. I do not mean that one can exhaust the Christian faith by any statement of it. There is always a vast overplus which escapes all our terms and definitions. But this does not mean that we can make no definite affirmations at all; for we can.

Another trend in modern religious thought is oversimplification in attempted accounts of Christianity. There is a constant striving to reduce Christianity to the lowest common denominator, to find some term or idea that will explain it all. Just now the popular catch-words are "service" and "love." Love, we are told, is the greatest thing in the world; love will solve all our problems; love is Christianity; Christianity is love. The refutation of this naive viewpoint is best accomplished by pointing out that what a man loves is really the important thing. It is not enough to know that a man loves God. What kind of God does he love? That is the crucial point and the surest index of character. But this desire to simplify Christianity is not peculiar to the artless and uncritical mind; it may be found also in the realm of critical scholarship. The motive and

results are quite different, but the principle is the same.

Various considerations have given impetus to this tendency toward oversimplification. For one thing, it seems to promise much in the direction of eliminating religious controversy, a thing which is no longer in good standing. Actually, of course, it works only so long as men will agree to ask no questions. Then also we must not omit that natural bent of the human mind, best represented by the philosophers, who for many centuries have been searching for one element or idea which will explain everything else. And I am quite willing to admit that there is a compelling fascination in explanations which seem to simplify. But all such explanations are attended with certain grave dangers.

In the first place, there is the danger of omitting matters of importance which may stand outside our neat little formulas and refuse to yield. By certain modern schools of thought this has been exalted into a definite technique. If something particularly thorny appears in the path of your investigation, you merely deny its existence, and lo, the problem is solved. Thus the "problem of knowledge" in philosophy has been solved; the "mind" in psychology; and the "super-natural" in Christianity. One recalls the case of the impatient old German professor who, confronted with a rock specimen which upset a geological theory of his, simply stepped to an open window and threw the offending specimen into the street. It is not at all unusual to find men, claiming to be guided by the scientific spirit, who treat the fact of Christianity in much the same short and hasty manner. Having made up their minds in advance, that religion can be explained wholly on naturalistic principles, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and all other miracles are impatiently tossed out the window. They do not fit the formula.

In the second place, through oversimplification there is always the danger that Christianity will be made over into a rather pale and uninteresting religious philosophy. It was William James who once suggested that, from a certain abstract viewpoint, violin music, even when produced by a master, might be described as the "scraping of horses' tails over cats' bowels." Such a definition of course has the merit of simplicity; it gets rid of all the mystery of personality and genius, but the residue is not very interesting. Certainly it could not provide the inspiration necessary for the development of great music and musicians. It is no less certain that an oversimplified form of Christianity will never win men in large numbers to the Christian life, however much it may intrigue a few academic minds with a passion for simplicity and completeness of explanation.

The most important things in life, from the standpoint of human interest,

are not as a rule the simplest. And this is strikingly true of Christianity. "Christianity has more than one dimension. It has height and depth as well as breadth." Any facile explanation which gets rid of all the profound mystery and fascinating richness in Christianity is certain to fail at last in its appeal to men. Take the Person of Christ, for example. How can Deity and true humanity be perfectly united in one person? That has always been one of the difficult intellectual problems of the Christian faith. Yet it is just at this point that Christian experience has found its richest satisfactions—in a Saviour who was "in all points tempted like as we are," and who is at the same time "over all, God blessed forever," infinitely able to meet all our needs.

A third tendency should be noted, represented by the popular attempts to define Christianity without paying due regard to its historical and experimental facts. Back of these attempts the motive seems generally to have been either literary or commercial, perhaps both. Their popularity may be accounted for by the astonishingly widespread desire for some "short cut" to the mastery of vast and difficult fields of knowledge. Everything must be made quick and easy; intellectual sweat is frowned upon. "Mr. Wells puts the history of the universe into a thousand passionate pages. Mr. Van Loon reduces even this to the level of a child of ten. The outline of all science is available in four volumes; the outline of all art in four more; and the outline of literature is still another set. Philosophy has become a 'story'; the religions of the world, another; and latterly there has appeared the outline of all man's knowledge — in a single book!"

Furthermore, it is a perfectly human trait to enjoy the spectacle of rebellion against "authority." Youth especially is greatly intrigued by the discovery that something can be said on the other side of almost every proposition. "Think for yourself" is the slogan of the times. And, properly defined, a good slogan it is; but in their vast enthusiasm for the new intellectual freedom some have misconceived its meaning. Thinking for oneself does not mean a liberty to cut loose from facts, for there is after all one authority to which all men must bow at the last—the authority of facts. We may ignore them temporarily, but we do so at our own peril. The wages of this sin is intellectual death.

Christianity has suffered from this tendency, not only among the superficial and unlearned, but also at the hands of those who are acknowledged scholars in various fields. For example, there is the treatment of Rousseau's religion by the distinguished P. M. Masson, who rightly points out that his religion knew nothing about redemption or repentance or a sense of sin, and then goes on to speak of the "pro-

OF DOUBTFUL VALUE

A Christian once said to John Wesley, "My talent is to speak my mind."

"Well, brother," replied the great preacher, "the Lord would not mind if you buried that talent."

—Selected

CHRISTIAN ENDEAVOR

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BRETHREN BRINGING CHRISTIAN ENDEAVOR
BY THE CHURCH UNCONSECRATED EXTENSION
OF THE GOSPEL TO THE LOST

found Christianity" of the noted Frenchman. This of course is worse than confusion, and all the more inexcusable by reason of the writer's scholarship. In the blunders of the unlearned there may be a touch of the amusing. A vociferous automobile salesman recently in my hearing referred to a certain preacher as "a real Christian," and offered as proof the rather curious facts that the minister in question enjoyed a good prize fight and did not resent a masculine oath. But when the learned ignore the facts which are available to all sincere investigators it is difficult to be tolerant.

Christianity is based upon facts, and these facts are verifiable by intellectual investigation and personal religious experience. We know that the Son of God is come. And we know that He was manifested to take away our sins. For eighteen centuries men have been coming to Him by faith, and in Him they have found relief for the guilty conscience, peace that passeth all understanding, the life which is more abundant, and courage to work for righteousness in a world which is lost in sin. The historical and experimental facts of Christianity are not closed books; they are open to all who care to read. True, it requires some time and labor to investigate and personally verify these facts; but that is true about any important body of facts.

Nothing could be more absurd and unscientific than to attempt a definition of Christianity without first mastering its facts. Let the reader imagine, if possible, a freshman entering the chemistry lecture room of some college for the first time. He has heard of chemistry and has decided that he will become a chemist. He inspects the rather lengthy and difficult of elements; some of them have an air of familiarity—he knows what it is—but others do not look inviting. Before leaving the room he informs the professor that he has decided to become a chemist, but he wishes to be an original thinker in this field, and in his opinion the chart of elements is much too long and complicated. Besides, it is conventional; therefore he will make his own chart. Doubtless the colleges have had some remarkable freshmen in their class rooms at various times, but it is pretty certain that no such freshman as I have described ever entered the doors of any institution of higher learning. Yet we have met college graduates whose conceptions of Christianity had been formed by somewhat the same process used by this hypothetical freshman of mine. With a lofty disregard for the vitally related body of Christian facts they have manufactured their religion by picking and choosing. The employment of this method has resulted in what might be called the "great Jesus-myth" of certain forms of popular modern religion—a Christ who bears little or no resemblance to the Christ of history and experience who is the Christ of God.

Finally, there is the basis which often accompanies narrow and specialized views of life. With the general idea of specialization there can be no quarrel, for in such a world as ours it would be hard to get along without the specialists. But there is a peculiar peril which attends all specialization. The specialist abstracts a small portion of human life from the whole and concentrates his attention upon it until he is in danger of forgetting how vast the whole enterprise of life really is. Christianity in the hands of such a man often fares badly. Never having learned to speak its universal language, men are making Christianity over in the image of their own narrow specialties. Fixing upon such aspects of it as they are able to use in their own restricted areas, they either pass over the rest in silence or else deny its validity. The result is a whole brood of inadequate accounts—sociological Christianity, biological Christianity, psychological Christianity, one hundred per cent. American Christianity; there is no end to them.

Christian education—and by this I mean education under Christian influence and control—is suffering from this bias of specialization to a marked degree. Too often the schoolmen, shut up to restricted areas of life, have taken out of Christianity what they themselves would use, ignoring the rest as if their own peculiar interests exhausted the possibilities of human life. For a long period the special emphasis was upon the doctrinal side. More recently the emphasis has shifted to the ethical side; nothing matters, we are told, except right relationships with our fellow men.

This narrowing of the Christian element in education to a mere ethical influence indicates an illiberal view of life. One might easily suppose, judging from some versions of Christianity current in educational circles, that life is wholly a kind of glorified college career from which the novitiate goes forth joyously to slay political and economic dragons, with the issue always successful. Certainly the destruction of such monsters is important business; but this is not the whole of life as men actually find it. Life includes a great deal of weakness, many failures and mistakes, irreparable losses, and an astonishing amount of "inconvenient pain." Even the prophets of modern philosophy can see this much. "Nothing could be more ironical," writes Professor Dewey, "than that those philosophers who professed universality have so often been one-sided specialists ignoring ignorance, error, folly. . . ." And in another passage he adds "death" to the long list of man's experiences which have been ignored by the system-makers.

As young men we go to college and listen hopefully to the professors as they outline their plans for changing the course of refractory world. Beautiful

plans they are, and interesting. But suppose they fail! Who then will gather up the fragments? Who will bring us undaunted and unafraid through the darkness of failure and catastrophe? It may be heretical to suggest the mere possibility of failure. Perhaps we shall be accounted selfish in wishing to save our own souls. But this desire for a soft place to land in case of failure is not altogether selfish. It is only taking into account real possibilities—call it foresight. The world is still a precarious place, not entirely safe for those with the best laid plans.

Now the function of all true education should be to prepare us for the business of life and the priceless merit of an educative process which is completely Christian is that it prepares us for the whole of life—life as it really is, with all its complex and varied possibilities. For such a task no so-called "simplified Christianity" is sufficient; it has been weighed and found wanting. We should have learned this lesson long ago. But if the reader is not convinced, let him scan carefully the record of our Lord's earthly life among men. He will find there the "ethics of Jesus," the popular but little understood "Jesus' Way of Life," and the "religion of Jesus." He will find there all of Christianity—except the

cross and its splendid sequel. Yet in the hour of crisis this "primitive Christianity" broke down utterly and failed, just because it failed to meet the deepest need of man who is a sinner. Christianity as a vital, spiritual, energizing, irresistible moral force began at the Place of the Skull and the open grave.

We should be profoundly grateful that men are coming at last to regard more seriously the ethical message of the Son of God; but we dare not forget that the Teacher of this message also said, "Without me ye can do nothing," and again, "The truth shall make you free." If we neglect these words it will be to our own destruction. Of course, for those who need only to know the right in order infallibly to do it, for those who are the captains of their souls, this word will have no meaning. The righteous need no Saviour. But most of us need help as well as information, strength as well as guidance, inspiration as well as precept, and life as well as rules for living.

The acute difficulty with all these narrow definitions of Christianity is that they are based on narrow views of life. Men have forgotten how great life is; they have forgotten the word of the Lord. "The life is more than meat." There are depths of truth here we have never sounded. Life is more than any part of it, more than anything which contributes to it, more than any philosophy which seeks to explain it, more than any sociological scheme to improve it. This is the mind of Christ. Men have spoken of Him as the great Idealist of the ages; and so He was. But He is also the great Realist, for He alone was able to look steadily at life

and see it as a whole, as it really is, with all its aspirations, joys, and successes, all its weaknesses, failures, losses, pains, and unsatisfied longings. And He saw life, not as some far off god might curiously regard the struggles of humanity, but as a loving Saviour who took upon Himself our flesh and blood, becoming an actual participant in the dust and turmoil of human existence. He alone knows the whole of life—its height, its depth, its breadth.

Now, Christianity properly conceived, Christianity as taught by our Lord and His chosen disciples, deals with all of life—life as it really is. "I am come," He says, "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." There is no human problem, no human experience, no permanent human interest, for which Christianity does not have some solution to offer, some contribution to make, or some word to speak.

Consider man's passion for concreteness. Certain philosophers may be satisfied with the pallid faith of speculative idealism; but this, I think, is an acquired taste. The heart of man yearns for concreteness in his religion, his ethics, and his ideals. Even Kant admitted as much while declaring that "what ought to be could never be deduced from what is." But Christianity proves that Kant was wrong. For all that "ought to be" in the religious life, in morality and ideals—all that ought to be at last is, revealed in a concrete Person who was here in human life historically, who now lives in the hearts of His followers, and who will once again break into the stream of human history. Or take man's yearning for fellowship with God. Some may indeed, like Clifford, feel "with utter loneliness that the great Companion is dead," but the Christian knows better. For this is precisely the point where Christianity most completely demonstrates its claim to be the only Way. To borrow the words of the late President E. Y. Mullins, "Call Buddha and Buddha does not come. Call Mohammed and Mohammed does not come. But call Jesus and He comes." Or think of man's silent protest against the incompleteness of human life as it appears in our present visible world. Nothing is finished—that is the difficulty. Now Christianity points the way to a richer, more abundant life here and now. But it does more; it holds out the prospect of an age to come when the crooked shall be made straight and that which is lacking shall be made complete.

But let us come to the crux of the matter: consider man's unutterable longings in the face of death. And I have no apology for mentioning this subject, for death is one of the facts of human experience, and it is nothing but sentimentalism to ignore it. "In the great literature of the world, Death figures at the last sombre enigma, before which man halts in dumb anguish or proud defiance, resenting its approach as that of a cruel and unnatural intruder, even when it closes a long and

happy life." Contemplated at this angle, death becomes "the focus of tragedy, the one incalculable woe, a reality so towering that shelter from it can be found in neither words nor silence." And yet we find that from the time immemorial men have tried to find shelter in both words and silence. Several years ago I ran across a pathetic bit of verse from the pen of an American poet; its tragic rhythm reveals one man's protest against the "last enemy":

Let me live out my years in heat of blood,
Let me die drunken with the dreamer's wine,
Let me not see this soul-house built of mud
Go topling to the dusk — a vacant shrine!

Let me go quickly, like a candle light
Snuffed out just at the heyday of its glow,
Give me high noon—and let it then be night!
Thus would I go.

And grant that when I face the grisly thing,
My song may trumpet down the grey
Perhaps;
Let me be as the tune-swept fiddle-string
That feels the Master melody — and snaps!

Christianity offers shelter from this "last sombre enigma," not in silence, neither merely in words, but in a Person and a fact—the Son of God and His resurrection from the dead. No religion can permanently succeed, no definition or interpretation of Christianity can be true, which ignores or fails to satisfy the great needs and longings of human life. To diminish Christianity is to set limits upon human life and despoil its richest possibilities. All exclusively "humanistic" tendencies become at last inhuman. But there is a true humanism, centered in Him who is both Son of Man and Son of God. "In Him ye are made full."